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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002688

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SUBJECT: DETAINEES REJECT PROPOSED LETTER TO ASAD, AS  
PROPOSAL ITSELF CAUSES MORE DIVISIONS IN CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: DAMASCUS 02517

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)  
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11. (C) SUMMARY: A number of detained signatories of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD) have rejected a proposed letter of appeal to President Bashar al-Asad, saying that they would rather die in prison for their freedom of expression than to beg. They have also announced their plans to begin a hunger strike, and will be joined by a number of fellow Adraa detainees held on opposition-related charges. Accusations that the proposed letter represents an act of collaboration with the security services have caused a flurry of denunciations and recriminations within the human rights community, leading to one major activist resigning from his organization. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) According to post contacts, a group of five lawyers met on June 3 with the DBD detainees to discuss their physical well-being and legal strategies. During the meeting, human rights lawyer and Syrian Human Rights Organization (SWASIAH) president Mohammed al-Hassani presented the four DBD detainees who admitted to authorities to signing the declaration (Anwar al-Bunni, Michel Kilo, Nidal Darwish, and Mahmoud Mur'i) with a draft letter to President Bashar al-Asad, asking him for release from detainment. (NOTE: The other six accused signatories denied signing the DBD during interrogation, but most observers believe they did in fact sign. END NOTE) Hassani told Poloff on June 5 that the detainees flatly rejected the idea of signing it, with Michel Kilo responding that "we'll die here to defend our freedom of expression" and "don't beg for us in the letter." The ten DBD detainees, along with Ali and Mohammed Abdullah, Kamal Labwani, and Fattah Jammous, plan to begin a hunger strike on June 13. Bunni's brother, Akram al-Bunni, has told the press that Anwar had ended his hunger strike on June 4.

13. (C) Meanwhile, the origins of the draft letter to the President have led to a flurry of discussion within the human rights community. Hassani told Poloff that the letter originated from his meeting with Rassem al-Attasi of the Arab Human Rights Organization (AHRO), and Danial Saud of the Committee for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights in Syria (CDF), and had been formally drafted by a SWASIAH board member. Hassani explained the proposal as an act of conflict resolution by the human rights organizations, which, in Hassani's eyes, should be neutral and not act as members of the opposition. Hassani told Poloff that he then later floated the proposal to a number of other civil society representatives, including National Democratic Front (NDF) spokesman Hassan Abdulazeem, activists Hazem Naher and George Sabraa, and Akram Bunni. Hassani said that only Abdulazeem

fully supported the proposal. When asked about the similarities between the proposed detainee letter and draft letters to Asad circulated last week by SARG security services among non-detained signatories (reftel), Hassani ducked the question, answering that if the proposal been coordinated with security agents, there would have been no need to seek the other organizations' opinions.

14. (C) Hassani's explanation of the letter's origins, however, have been greeted with skepticism and denunciation by other actors in the human rights field, who view it as a product of Hassani's (and possibly others') collaboration with the security services. Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS) director Radwan Zyadeh expressed his disgust at Hassani's project June 5 to Poloff and said that the letter was clearly written in cooperation with security services. Zyadeh added, however, that the DBD detentions are an element in the battle for freedom of expression and that civil society needed to focus on this fact and end the infighting. He also noted that he would be traveling to Cairo June 6 to meet with lawyers from a variety of regional and international human rights organizations to strategize on the DBD case.

15. (C) A chain of conflicts and recriminations has followed in the wake of Hassani's initiative, as a group of activists published a press release on June 7, condemning Hassani's "attempts to promote one of his security bargains during his visit." They also took issue with his claims that the initiative was a cooperative endeavor among some opposition parties and human rights organizations. The statement's signatories declared their "complete boycott" of Hassani and "urged all professional and media institutions not to deal with Hassani." Major signatories included Ammar

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Qurrabi, the head of the National Organization of Human Rights (NOHR), and the heads of several other small human rights groups, including Abdulkarim al-Rihawi. According to post contacts, Qurrabi signed on behalf of NOHR without receiving permission from the entire board of directors. Qurrabi's unilateral action prompted still further bureaucratic bloodletting, with NOHR board member and key human rights lawyer Khalil Maatouk resigning from NOHR on June 7, citing his anger over Qurrabi's failure to consult with the NOHR board before taking action.

16. (C) COMMENT: Hassani's version of events is probably not accurate and indicates an uneasiness about SARG security services' influence over his actions. Rihawi and Qurrabi's willingness to so publicly smear one of their fellow activists is curiously timed, only a week after making their own public statements at the behest of the security services (reftel). It is clear that at least some activists like Zyadeh recognize that the SARG is manipulating the human rights movement, so as to divide and weaken it, especially in the wake of the release of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration, which so angered the regime. These activists are looking for means to counter the SARG's interference, although the events of this week show that this search has so far been in vain and that the SARG has won another round in its drive to divide civil society, and to shift the focus away from the activists it has imprisoned, as well as to undermine the legitimacy and support shown for the DBD.  
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